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Brief of the Royal
Commission

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BRIEF
to the
ROYAL COMMISSION
ON
VIOLENCE IN THE COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY

The Canadian Association of Social Workers welcomes this opportunity to address the Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry. As professionals concerned with helping people, social workers are naturally aware of and concerned about the effects of violence within our society. Social workers confront the effects of violence on many levels and in varying situations. Violence, as with many social ills, is a pervasive phenomenon. The causes of violence, as well as the effects, must be seriously examined. We understand this to be the mandate of the Royal Commission, and we support this endeavour.

There are many examples of violence in the communications industry which spring readily to mind. Perhaps the prime example which we have recently experienced was the media coverage of the Vietnam war. For the first time in history, war was brought into the living rooms of millions of people -- to the end that the war and the horrors associated with it became almost commonplace, everyday aspects of our lives. The war, in effect, became almost boring.

The lesson to be learned from this is indeed a tremendous one. It indicates that in this age of instant communications and mass media, we can become conditioned by what we see, read and hear to an extent far greater than would have been possible half a century ago.

The effects of violence in the communications media also take more tangible forms. There is some evidence to suggest that the recent tragedy in an Ottawa high school, where a youth killed two fellow students and then himself, was prompted at least in part by the coverage afforded a similar incident in Brampton. We do not contend that the tragedy could have been averted if the Brampton incident had been publicized, but the similarity in the incidents is such that we may infer at least some suggestibility in the Ottawa case.

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One of our concerns in approaching the subject addressed by this Royal Commission is the definition of violence being used. It is our contention that violence is not restricted to the overt commission of violent acts, such as portrayals of shootings, muggings and other forms of assault against persons or property. Violence, we feel, goes beyond this, and assumes many, more subtle forms. "Dirty Harry" may be violent, but violence is not "Dirty Harry". The more subtle forms of violence of which we speak are inextricably linked to the impact which modern mass communications have upon society. We submit that violence, in addition to overt acts of a violent nature,

includes anything which has an insidious effect on the well-being of society. Violence, by our expanded definition, would include the weakening of the family unit which we fear may result from the impact of media on our lives.

We are concerned primarily with the presentation of life styles which create the expectation on the part of people that success in living is measured primarily by the acquisition of material goods. Poor people are exposed to the same forms of media conditioning as are the more privileged groups in society. Advertisements tell them that, in effect, if they cannot purchase a new automobile every year they are somehow a failure. Persons depicted in commercial advertising are almost invariably "solid" middle class types, who live in the suburbs, own a station wagon and a single family house. This is not an accurate reflection of society, and the picture that it fosters of society's expectations of people is also inaccurate, and inherently unfair. Is it so very far out of line to contend that a young child who is exposed to such advertising on television may question why his or her parents cannot afford the single family house and the station wagon? Is this impact on the young mind not violent? We submit that it is. We feel that these are concerns that the Commission should address, as well as the more tangible concerns over the portrayal of violent crimes.

Perhaps the media form which has altered our lives more than any

other is television, and we thus feel that this should be a prime subject of investigation for the Royal Commission. It is possible for those of us aged thirty and over to remember when there was no commercial television, and to remember the early days of television, when it was still considered a novelty. Television is no longer a novelty. It is a highly sophisticated form of mass communication that plays an enormous part in everyday living. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of television as we know it today when the first commercial sets were introduced. We must also give serious consideration to the fact that the generation born since 1950 has never known an absence of television. Children today are exposed to several hours, by and large, of television viewing. Long before a child learns to read, he or she is capable of understanding the messages broadcast by television. Comparisons to radio are not very meaningful, since the child can see as well as hear the actions being portrayed. Let us consider, then, what they see.

We have already made mention of the portrayal of life styles. Children's prime viewing time is crowded with programs such as "The Brady Bunch", "The Partridge Family", and "That Girl". The overpowering message in all of these programs is that life is a happy-go-lucky affair. The "crises" which invariably arise are of such a saccharine or slapstick nature as to be nothing more than mildly embarrassing situations which are always satisfactorily resolved by the hero or heroine involved. The life style, again, is middle class; the

Brady family, in fact, employ a maid to do all the work of the household. We contend that portrayals such as these cannot help but create false impressions and foster expectations in the minds of children which bear no relation to the reality of life. The examples do not stop here.

Perhaps one of the most extreme examples of false portrayals was "Hogan's Heroes", which, again, is a syndicated feature broadcast in many communities during the prime viewing time of children. In this program, life in a prisoner of war camp in Germany during the Second World War was depicted as one raucous lark. Colonel Hogan and his clever cohorts outwitted Colonel Klink and his bumbling Germans at every turn, and the audience cheered as fuel dumps and ammunition trains were blown up. We doubt that anyone who experienced a German prisoner of war camp would describe the situations depicted in this show as accurate. There was nothing funny about Gestapo officers, and there is nothing to cheer about in the conduct of combat operations. Yet young children, who have no real idea of what a war actually is, are shown that even this, man's most degrading endeavour, is not only glorious, but funny.

False portrayals of life and society are not limited to situation comedies. Award winning programs of a serious nature are also involved. Can we conceive of "The Waltons" as being violent? We feel that we can. To depict this family in the manner in which it is done is to reinforce yet another middle class principle -- that is, the concept of the worthy poor. If social situations are to be depicted, then we feel that they

should be depicted in a realistic fashion. Self-effacing "worthy poor" people, as depicted in "The Waltons" do not convey what it feels like to be poor, or to confront the very real problems faced by those burdened by poverty.

The impact is not restricted to children. An instance was reported by a social worker where the parents of a child involved with the Children's Aid Society were actually more concerned with the outcome of an impending operation on an afternoon soap opera than they were with the very real problems confronting their own family. Escapism undoubtedly has some place in entertainment, but when it becomes a substitute for reality it over-steps its proper place.

News coverage of violence in the world also raises concerns. We fully understand and accept the premise that the news media must be allowed to report the news in an unfettered manner. We would be the last to suggest that the government impose restraints on the reporting of news events, or otherwise diminish the freedom of the press. Self-restraint, however, need not be viewed in the same light as government-imposed censorship. Vietnam was but a prelude to the coverage of violence that we are now being exposed to. The Lebanese civil war and the violent strife in Northern Ireland are all too graphically depicted each day in newspapers, magazines, radio and television news coverage. As with the Vietnam experience, we are becoming so used to seeing bodies lying in the streets of Beirut and bombs exploding in Londonderry pubs that the real horror of violence is becoming lost to us. We cannot, of

course, close our eyes to what is going on in the world simply because it is violent. The news media have a responsibility to report such news. They do not, however, have to give violence the extensive coverage it currently receives. Violence does not have to be as graphically depicted as it now is. We feel that the public's right to know and the media's right to report must be tempered with enough restraint and decorum as possible, and we feel that the news media, not the government, should be concerned with injecting discretion into reporting.

One of the subjects which must be examined in order to determine why certain material or messages are presented in the media is the question of who has access to the media. The Real Poverty Report, published in 1971, gives some interesting statistics. The percentages of gross income raised through advertising at that time were as follows: 65% of newspaper income, 70% of magazine income, and 93% of broadcasting income was raised in this manner. According to the report, corporate concentration and the media determine a lack of public awareness of poverty; it is in the interest of corporations to foster and sustain a middle class image of society. This surely finds its way into programming through the availability of advertising income.

Certainly, access to media is not available to the public on a regular basis. Public television, both in Canada and the United States, has broadened general access, but there is certainly room for improvement in this area. The public should also have more input

into the licensing of broadcast media outlets. Media, in general, must be made more responsive to the needs of the public, and responsible to the public.

We have tried to present some of the concerns of our Association to the Royal Commission. It is our sincere hope that the Commission will take an active stance in regard to violence in the media. We would be surprised if the data collected by the Commission's study differed significantly from the findings of previous studies. We anticipate the Commission's finding that violence in the media is a significant problem in society today, as others have indicated. Where the present Royal Commission can advance beyond previous studies is in the area of action. It is one thing to say that violence in media is a bad thing. It is quite another to do something about it. It is our hope that the Royal Commission will make strong recommendations, and that action on those recommendations will ensue.

In summary, we would like to pose the following recommendations of our own to the Royal Commission.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A wider, more inclusive definition of violence is needed, one that will address the more subtle forms of violence in our society.
2. A social conscience must be developed and fostered by corporations and others who have access and control of communications media.
3. There must be more opportunities for consumer access to and control of media.
4. The Provincial authorities should be given more control over the granting of licenses to ensure a priority of quality of programming and content directed toward selected interest groups.
5. Educational television should be encouraged and programming expanded.

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